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REVIEWS.

MR ALLEN'S NEW NOVEL.¹

It is unfortunate that in reading this novel one cannot put out of one's mind the vociferous chorus of incoherent laudation with which it has been greeted in certain quarters. No critic who had read *The Kentucky Cardinal* could look with any but pleasant anticipation to another story by Mr. Allen, but really we should have been surprised had it merited praise that would have seemed exaggerated if it had been applied to the monumental mass of *Germinal*, to the keen analysis of *Eugénie Graudet* or even to the poetic fervor of Isaiah. If anyone has read these dithyrambs and is not too *écœuré* to read "The Choir Invisible" after them, he will have somewhat the impression of Elijah who after the tempest, the earth-quake and the fire heard only a still small voice.

Mr. Allen has given us another good and in the main healthy novel of Kentucky life, rather above the average in seriousness of purpose and in diction; but it is no better than we had last year or may expect next, and that it has been placed with *The Scarlet Letter* or *The Iceland Fisherman* shows that our judges lack a critical perspective. One would gladly speak only in praise of what has given pleasure but surely this is a case where a critic may feel obliged to protest his sanity by some reserve, even when as here space will suffer him to assert only and not to prove. It ought to be evident to any attentive reader that the central situation, the contest in a high-minded man between his love for a married woman and his social duty, and in a woman between her duty to an indifferent husband and a late-found affinity, is as old as novel-writing. The development of the situation is encumbered with unnecessary episodes and characters, and there is nothing inevitable in

¹ *The Choir Invisible*, by James Lane Allen, New York, Macmillan's 1897.

the evolution of the story, which proceeds less from the inner nature of the actors than from outside impulses upon them. Then too those persons for whom it is intended to enlist our sympathy all fall at times strangely below themselves and exasperate us by curious lapses, senile in the case of the parson, puerile in Mrs. Falconer and Mr. Gray. And then there seem to be a few strange aberrations of taste, about which it is proverbially idle to dispute, though we had supposed that Saint-Simon in his account of Louis Fourteenth's handkerchiefs had given the last literary expression to the perfumes of perspiration, and that young ladies even in 1795 would not have found it an added charm in their clothes that they were "redolent of the ball" (p. 158).

Well, after all, *de gustibus (minime ab sudore) non disputandum*. Still, we had not supposed that we should be invited to pursue the Midsummer Nights' Dream of a tutor, as he pictures the details of his blissful future awakenings in a *solitude à deux* "when her little shoes might stand on his open Bible, if they chose, and the satin instep of her bare foot be folded in the hard hollow of his" (p. 55). We knew we could find this sort of thing, if we thirsted for it, in the *New Heloise*, as well as the Peeping Tom scene of page 290. But somehow, this intermingling (I will not say of what), seems inseparable from sentiment whether of the chivalrous or romantic type. There are minor infelicities, too, both of language and feeling, but we may pass them over, as indeed we might those that had gone before were it not that some specification seemed necessary in our *caveat* against indiscriminate laudation. We are utterly unable to comprehend the æsthetic standard that can allow this book to be classed with "The Scarlet Letter," or with any other of the few masterpieces of fiction. But it is a very good novel with many powerful passages, and we heartily commend it to our readers, though we consider its chivalrous ideals and *Morte d'Arthur* sentiment injurious in their supposed times and undesirable for ours.

J. A.